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ABSTRACT

Although high profile media mergers gain national attention, collaboration seems to be the trend among local news gathering organizations. Local media are discovering that one answer to cutbacks in budgets and personnel is to work with the competition to get the story. The verdict is still out about how the competitor-as-collaborator approach will affect the news product. One effort appears to have only begun the collaboration between a local newspaper and television news operation. "Behind the Badge," an in-depth look at the Chattanooga (Tennessee) Police Department, was published and aired during the first week of August 1996 by "The Chattanooga Times" and WTVC NewsChannel 9. This case study challenges the traditional model of news organizations as competitors and, thus, has implications for journalism educators. It also demonstrates interesting techniques in the collaborative efforts of gathering and presenting news information. Among the implications for journalism educators are: (1) impressing on print- and broadcast-oriented students an understanding that both of the competing media can perform valuable journalistic roles; (2) preparing tomorrow's journalists to work with each other, one of the ingredients of success in the collaboration described here; and (3) ensuring that journalism students understand the methods, strengths, and shortcomings of the two media. Technology and technique may differ, but each can produce good journalism. (Contains 22 references.) (Author/CR)

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The Chattanooga Times and NewsChannel 9: Working Together to Get the Scoop and the Implications for Journalism Educators

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This paper focuses on one effort that appears to have only begun the collaboration between a local newspaper and television news operation. "Behind the Badge," an in-depth look at the Chattanooga Police Department, was published and aired during the first week of August 1996 by *The Chattanooga Times*, and WTVC, NewsChannel 9.

This case study is remarkable for two reasons: It challenges the traditional model of news organizations as competitors and, thus, has implications for journalism educators. And it demonstrates interesting techniques in the collaborative efforts of gathering and presenting news information.

Among the implications for journalism educators presented in the paper are:

- impressing on print- and broadcast-oriented students an understanding that both of the competing media can perform valuable journalistic roles.
- preparing tomorrow's journalists to work with each other, one of the ingredients of success in the collaboration described in this paper.
- ensuring that journalism students understand the methods, strengths and shortcomings of the two media. Technology and technique may differ, but each can produce good journalism.

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THE CHATTANOOGA TIMES AND NEWSCHANNEL 9: WORKING TOGETHER TO GET THE SCOOP AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR JOURNALISM EDUCATORS

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Introduction

The high-profile mergers of Westinghouse and CBS, Disney and Capital Cities/ABC and Time Warner and Turner may suggest that consolidation is the name of the media game in the twilight years of the twentieth century.

Locally, however, collaboration appears to be the trend among media in many cities across the country. Examples abound, even among outlets that are not co-owned. Radio station drive-time traffic reporters air reports on network-affiliated television stations. TV station meteorologists broadcast current conditions and forecasts on radio stations and write forecasts for newspapers. Television stations produce newscasts for other TV stations. And newspaper, radio and television reporters exchange local sports scores.

News organizations are discovering that one answer to cutbacks in budgets and personnel is to work with the competition to get the story. The verdict is still out about how the competitor-as-collaborator approach will affect the news product.

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Will there be fewer stories overall due to decreased news-gathering competition? Will news organizations strive less to "get the scoop" because they are no longer competitors, at least temporarily? Will audiences suffer as a result of such collaboration?

To date, no serious attempts have been made to answer such questions. Stories about collaborative agreements have appeared in the trade press from time to time. However, a review of data bases of industry and academic publications yields little on the effects of such collaborations and nothing at all on their implications for journalism educators.

This paper focuses on one effort that appears to have only begun the collaboration between a local newspaper and television news operation. "Behind the Badge," an in-depth look at the Chattanooga Police Department, was published and aired during the first week of August 1996 by *The Chattanooga Times*, a morning newspaper with a circulation of 41,100, and WTVC, NewsChannel 9, the ABC affiliate and top news-rated station in the 82nd market. The Times competes with the afternoon *Chattanooga Free Press* and WTVC with three network-affiliated stations which produce local newscasts.

This case study is remarkable for two reasons: It challenges the traditional model of news organizations as competitors and, thus, has implications for journalism educators. And it demonstrates interesting techniques in the

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collaborative efforts of gathering and presenting news information.

Background

The idea for the series evolved from two ongoing news events in Chattanooga: (1) a federal grand jury investigation into hundreds of thousands of dollars missing from the city's police drug fund and (2) information provided to Times reporter Mark Curriden by a private source claiming that a U.S. Department of Justice report showed the city's police ranking among the worst in the country on citizen complaints about police harassment and brutality.

When Chattanooga's mayor criticized federal officials for publicizing what he considered misleading complaint numbers and *The Chattanooga Times* for overemphasizing them, Curriden attempted to sell to his superiors the idea for an investigative look into the police department.[1]

He realized that the task would be daunting. Examining more than 400 personnel files would require more person-power than the newspaper could provide. So he approached WTVC's news assignment manager Steve Hunsicker about assisting in the files search.

The newspaper and television station had agreed several months earlier to an exchange of information. However, this exchange was limited to courtroom developments covered by The Times and breaking news gleaned from the police scanner by

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NewsChannel 9.[2] Collaboration on a lengthy, complex and potentially explosive series would be a first for both organizations.

Hunsicker agreed to the collaborative effort. He concluded that the newspaper series would bring additional publicity and, perhaps, Times readers to his station. The station would also benefit from what he called the "image" of association with the newspaper.[3] At the same time, Curriden realized that the station's participation would overcome the staffing problem. Further, the newspaper could benefit from the TV publicity and might attract viewers to the publication.[4]

Thus was born the most ambitious collaborative venture ever undertaken by either news organization.

The Series

Files Review. The first challenge was to gain access to the police department's personnel files. Several requests from both news organizations went unanswered. After three weeks of unsuccessful efforts, Curriden spoke with the city attorney and access was granted. Curriden believes that collaboration was key: The "power" of two of the city's leading news outlets lent more weight to the requests than could have been summoned by one organization acting alone.[5]

For 13 days, three Times employees and two from NewsChannel 9 sifted through the files of 428 officers in a

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room adjacent to the office of the chief of police. At the outset, they did not know if they would find anything of importance. That changed on the third day, with the discovery of an Exceptional Occurrence Form (EOF). It had been introduced two decades earlier by then-Police Commissioner, now Mayor, Gene Roberts as a means of tracking officers who tended to use force more than other officers. Now, internal affairs records were added to the personnel files as materials for review. Perhaps they would shed light on the disposition of incidents detailed in the EOFs.

The collaboration continued daily. Employees of the two organizations who found what they considered significant information requested two copies of documents, one for the newspaper and the other for the television station. Over lunch each day, Curriden and Hunsicker shared details of what had been found. Together, they mulled over story ideas for their respective media. "Scooping" each other was never a consideration, Curriden said.[6]

Series Preparation. With the initial file and record checking completed, the two organizations moved into the story preparation phase. Both designated additional staff to the task, chiefly to handle sidebar pieces and graphic and photographic assignments.

NewsChannel 9 designed the series logo to be used by the two media. And the two agreed on cross-promotions that each would employ. The Times' stories would be accompanied by the

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series logo and that of WTVC. Similarly, the station would use both the series and newspaper logos. References to the investigation in both media would indicate that it was a joint effort.

An agreement also was reached on the scheduling of the series, and it reflected the television station's insistence that it run during a ratings period. However, extensive coverage of the Olympic Games in nearby Atlanta caused it to be scheduled in such a way that only the first three days fell within the period, the final week of "sweeps."

The news organizations also pursued stories independently. Employees of each organization returned to the files and records to check for accuracy and completeness. Each developed their own main stories and sidebars and, in so doing, conducted interviews with their own sources. Here again, though, all information gathered from the sources was shared.

Collaboration also marked the decisions on stories that would be published or broadcast. Agreement was reached at a meeting of Times Managing Editor Ron Smith, WTVC News Director Jim Church, Curriden and Hunsicker.

Series Execution. Detailed facts and data characterized the series in The Times. A total of 502 column inches of text and 140 column inches in graphics and text boxes were presented over the six days the newspaper ran the stories. Curriden said that, although the editors imposed no

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space restrictions, he worried that readers may have been "bombarded" with information.[7]

The series dominated NewsChannel 9's 6 p.m. newscasts during its five-day run. Treating the issues uncovered by the investigation through the experiences of police personnel, the station devoted 48 minutes and 21 seconds to series stories, an average of nine minutes and 40 seconds in each newscast. Hunsicker concluded that the venture was a commendable exercise in journalism. However, he doubted if it qualified as "good television," largely because it lacked the variety of visually-compelling content he would have liked, such as interviews with officers identified in the series and footage of confrontations that had triggered an exceptional occurrence report.[8] Interview requests had been turned down and archival footage was not available for the series.

Results

The execution of the series enabled Curriden to accomplish his goal of investigating the Chattanooga Police Department. The two news organizations achieved their publicity goals and also benefitted from radio station reports on the series which credited the sources.

However, neither the newspaper nor the TV station attracted an increased number of readers[9] or viewers[10]. In fact, the only reactions observed at The Times were a handful

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of letters to the editor and a few telephone calls with suggestions for series-related items to pursue. NewsChannel 9 received some telephoned complaints about police behaviors similar to those treated in the series. The station also was threatened with a lawsuit by a representative of a police officers' association. To date, no lawsuit has been filed.

This is not to suggest that the collaborative effort was without impact. As a result of the series, several police officers said they had become more aware of problems in the department. An officer, identified in the series as having a higher-than-average number of confrontations with citizens, resigned. And there were reports that the department was contemplating a morale-building program.

One unanticipated effect was an improvement in relations between the police department and the two media. The new climate was noticeable, especially, at The Times, whose relations with police officers and administrators had been strained. Curriden spoke of a "dramatic improvement" in relations.[11] Hunsicker said that relations "probably" had improved.[12]

The amelioration in external relations may not have been matched internally, at least at The Times. Even Curriden confessed that several of his colleagues questioned the allocation of so many staff resources to the series.[13]

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Nonetheless, decision makers at both news organizations must have concluded that the venture had been worthwhile. Only three months after "Behind the Badge," the two news organizations collaborated again in a series titled "Redlining: The Color of Credit."

Implications for Journalism Educators

For most of the twentieth century, newspapers have had to share their role as purveyors of news with the electronic media. First came radio. Then television emerged and quickly established itself as the number one medium for information about what was going on in the world. The 1980s brought round-the-clock television news with the arrival of CNN. The 1990s have added a new competitor in the form of computer news and information services via the Internet.

Newspapers have not always taken kindly to media born of the technological advances of this century. Indeed, when television emerged, "many newspapers refused to acknowledge that the medium even existed."[14] Even today, they view each other with suspicion.[15]

Now both media are facing unprecedented competition for audiences. Newspapers have seen their circulations plummet. Despite their best efforts, they have been unable to attract in sizeable numbers a new generation of readers, raised in an age of video plenty and excited by the promise of the

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Internet. Television has experienced a decline in shares for newscasts, even at the local level.[16]

In a climate characterized by increased competition and dwindling audiences for both local newspapers and local television news broadcasts there emerges a phenomenon that once was unthinkable: Collaboration between a newspaper and a television station on an investigative series.

If it were an isolated example of collaboration, it would probably merit no more than a passing acknowledgment. However, when considered in the light of other collaborative efforts, it should cause journalism educators to reconsider the traditional notion of news organizations as competitors.

This is not to imply that faculty should not continue to impress on students the importance of getting the story first. Healthy competition should always be a priority if the public's information needs are to be satisfied and if journalism is to fulfill its role as the fourth estate.

While this paper does not pretend to offer suggestions for specific curricular changes, the collaboration recounted here does contain several specific implications for journalism educators.

• Impressing on print- and broadcast-oriented students an understanding that both of the competing media can perform valuable journalistic roles.

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• Preparing tomorrow's journalists to work with each other, one of the ingredients of success in the collaboration described in this paper.

• Ensuring that journalism students understand the methods, strengths and shortcomings of the two media. Technology and technique may differ, but each can produce good journalism.

The present study demonstrates that the characteristics of newspapers and television demand different treatment of the same information. As Curriden observed, no space restrictions were imposed at The Times. Accordingly, the newspaper was able to devote more than 500 column inches of text to the series. In contrast, time limitations compelled NewsChannel 9 to treat stories much more conscisely and even to delay some stories to accommodate other news developments.

The study also points to the benefits accruing from the permanence of print, making possible the inclusion of huge amounts of data in the body of stories and in 140 column inches of graphics and text boxes, all to be absorbed at the reader's leisure. The ephemeral nature of television, on the other hand, makes it difficult for viewers to digest more than a modest amount of such information. Instead, the medium often builds stories around persons to whom viewers can relate.

An examination of the main stories in the "Behind the Badge" series shows that NewsChannel 9 followed this

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approach. In fact, it used a "person" story as its first to point to the role of politics in the hiring and retention of officers. In sharp contrast, The Times did not publish this particular story until the fifth day. Overall, the television station focused on people in four of the five main stories aired. The Times' stories focused primarily on issues: The frequency of the use of force and circumstances leading to its use, the pros and cons of pepper spray as a means of subduing violent suspects, and hiring and firing practices. On only one day were officers the subjects of the newspaper's main series story.

Although this study may provide a glimpse of the future, it is much too early to conclude that it is the first step toward a new era of alliances between news organizations.

If such an era arrives, providing students with an understanding of the workings of the different media will not suffice.

• Journalism educators will be obliged to develop in students the practical skills appropriate to all media.

As evidence, professors may point to the several dozen newspapers that lease or own cable television channels or that have joined with cable companies to provide news via both newspapers and television.

The *Chicago Tribune* partnered with Tribune Broadcasting Company to form ChicagoLand Television News (CLTV), a local cable news channel which shares a newsroom with the Tribune's

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suburban bureau in Oak Brook, Illinois. CLTV also maintains a camera in the Tribune's newsroom in Tribune Tower.[17]

The sharing of news leads and information resources is a characteristic of News 12 New Jersey, a 24-hour regional news channel established jointly by Cablevision Systems and Advance Publications, owner of the Newark *Star Ledger*.[18]

One of the most ambitious collaborations, and one that may portend an entirely new model of news operation, began in 1995 with establishment by the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* and Comcast Cablevision of Sarasota News Now (SNN), a 24-hour local cable news channel. Claiming that it is the only newspaper to fully integrate print and broadcast journalism, the newspaper's executive editor said that, rather than competing to be first with stories, *Herald-Tribune* and SNN reporters will work together to provide a "continuum" of local coverage. "Ultimately," she said, "some *Herald-Tribune*/SNN journalists will be ambidextrous, able to produce both written and broadcast versions of their stories. At the very least, every staff member will become fluent in both media."[19]

If the Sarasota model prevails, the implications for journalism educators are clear: It will not be enough to prepare print and broadcast journalists with the ability to work together. What will be required is a curriculum that prepares both to handle the professional skills demanded by

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each medium so that they may satisfy the information needs of both readers and viewers.

The Sarasota model is not alone in recognizing and responding to the new competitive environment. Fuelled by the growth and popularity of computer online information services and the rush by major news organizations to provide them, a model of multimedia journalism is emerging. It is already influencing the curricula of many journalism programs and brings with it many implications for journalism educators.

One of the first attempts to develop a multimedia curriculum was introduced in 1993 in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The intent was to reflect in the classroom the media convergence that was occurring outside. An initial goal, largely accomplished, was to assemble an online journal incorporating traditional text, graphics and digital photography, audio and, eventually, television.[20]

This new, convergence-driven curriculum will pose far-reaching challenges to faculty.

• Obviously, the teaching of computer literacy skills must be added to journalism skills which, themselves, are changing to accommodate the demands of multimedia:

> The inherent qualities of the Internet force us to address stories and topics in a layered

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> way -- our students must consider how topics discussed in their stories can be expanded upon by original stories or by links to related articles. In addition, they must consider how sound and video can play a role in the stories.[21]

• One of the greatest challenges for journalism educators in the online era, however, will be to continue to be mindful of the tenets of journalism and to avoid being swept along by the technological possibilities of news gathering and dissemination:

> It is important for teachers and students to update continuously their knowledge and use of various technologies and means of distributing news and feature stories -- newspapers, magazines, broadcasting and on-line. But teachers and students should not lose sight of the main point of journalism -- how to find and tell word and visual stories.[22]

Recommendations for Further Study

At the outset, questions were raised about the effects on the news product of collaboration betweeen traditionally competitive media:

• Will there be fewer stories overall due to decreased news-gathering competition? This study may suggest the opposite. Without the collaboration, there would have been

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no series. With it, readers were exposed to more than 500 column inches of text alone and viewers to almost 50 minutes of stories. Obviously, further study of this question is desirable.

• In an era of cooperation, will news organizations strive less to "get the scoop"? Although no attempt was made to answer that question here, it is one that should be pursued.

• Will audiences suffer as a result of collaboration? This study suggests that the public may have been served quite well by the series. It confirmed for many viewers and readers long-rumored discord in the police department. And police morale became a major issue in Chattanooga's 1997 mayoral election campaign. Study of the effects of collaborative ventures on audience awareness is recommended.

Endnotes

1. Mark Curriden, interview with authors, October 8, 1996. (Curriden is now with *The Dallas Morning News*.)
2. Steve Hunsicker, interview with authors, October 22, 1996.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Interview with authors, October 8, 1996.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*

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8. Interview with authors, October 22, 1996.
9. Circulation figures provided by Paul Neely, publisher, *The Chattanooga Times*, November 1, 1996.
10. *Nielsen Station Index*, Chattanooga, July 1996, p. 34.
11. Interview with authors, October 8, 1996.
12. Interview with authors, October 22, 1996.
13. Interview with authors, October 8, 1996.
14. Michael Conniff, "An idea whose time has come?" *Editor & Publisher*, March 19, 1994, p. 26.
15. "Tribune Co. to consult on TV ventures," *Editor & Publisher*, April 16, 1994, p. 37.
16. Steve Hunsicker, interview with authors, October 22, 1996.
17. "Tribune Co. to consult on TV ventures," *Editor & Publisher*, April 16, 1994, p. 37.
18. Jim McConville, "Cablevision to cover Jersey," *Broadcasting & Cable*, September 11, 1995, p. 45.
19. Diane McFarlin, "A media marriage of news, now and forever," *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, July 2, 1995, p. F2.
20. Lewis A. Friedland and Sheila Webb, "Incorporating Online Publishing into the Curriculum," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 51:3 (Autumn 1996), p. 59.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 61.
22. Betty Medsger, *Winds of Change: Challenges Confronting Journalism Education* (Arlington, Va.: The Freedom Forum, 1996), p. 66.

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